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ABSTRACT

The literature concerning the corporate culture of the United States is a starting point for comparing the institutions of different cultures. However, teaching about the cultural context of business is not simply a matter of describing non-American companies in American terms, and American-born language teachers usually have little experience with the target culture or its corporate subculture. Available sources for developing cultural information for classroom use include print and videotaped materials that are either specific to a country or relate to management and public policy. Recurring themes in literature concerning French corporate culture include the role of the state in business, consideration of what a French analyst expects to find when looking at a company, and proposals for improving companies' situations. The management of information is another area of considerable difference between France and the United States, and is examined in various ways in the literature. This is one illustration of the fact that management styles cannot simply be transplanted from one culture to another. (MSE)

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PERCEPTIONS OF WAYS IN WHICH FRENCH AND AMERICAN BUSINESS PRACTICES REFLECT CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

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Title: Perceptions of Ways in which French and American Business Practices Reflect Cultural Differences

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The analysis of a system in which one lives and works is difficult precisely because the assumptions that one takes the most for granted are rarely verbalized. As a consequence, an outsider may describe the structures and dynamics of a system more clearly than an insider who is affected by those structures at an unconscious, or at least unspoken, level. Yet insiders do attempt analyses: scholars ranging from speech act theoreticians to Michel Foucault have analyzed the powerful conventions that determine what may-- or may not-- be said. American scholars have distanced themselves from the culture of the American business world and have described not only its dynamics and structures, but also ways of taking advantage of the principles uncovered to improve a company's situation. One such text, Corporate Cultures: The Rites and Rituals of Corporate Lives, by Terrence E. Deal and Allen A. Kennedy, explicitly points to the shared assumptions that control behavior in American companies.[1]

The use of the word "culture" is not accidental: the authors find that the constellation of features that determine who may talk to whom, what values are shared, and how one relates to his (usually his) fellow workers is crucial. Corporate success is

not, in their view, a function of the manipulation of numbers. Similar conclusions are reached in another book intended for a broad, non-specialist audience, In Search of Excellence. Its authors, Thomas J. Peters and Robert H. Waterman, Jr., like Deal and Kennedy, use the term "culture" as they describe what characterizes America's best-run companies.[2]

Peters and Waterman, in In Search of Excellence, abstract a set of descriptors that successful companies appear to share, for example, a bias for action and a concern for the customer. Deal and Kennedy, on the other hand, suggest that even within the group of highly-esteemed companies that all four authors discuss-- GE, IBM, McDonald's, among others-- different models may apply. Deal and Kennedy identify differences among successful companies, opposing, for example, what they call the "tough-guy, macho" culture, with high risks and quick feedback, to the "bet-your-company" culture, characterized by long delays in getting feedback. Not even within one country is there one cultural model shared by all successful companies.

Deal and Kennedy claim that managers can have a positive impact by prizing certain values, or even by making the values that they hold explicit. In pointing out that teaching of this sort can play a significant role, the authors suggest that what works is not so automatic as we might assume. We are forcibly reminded-- if we need to be-- that values are taught and that there is an important element of relativism in what appears to be "normal" and "natural."

These books give us a starting-point for comparing the institutions of different cultures. But it would not be satisfactory simply to take the grids and charts and principles from an American book and attempt to describe non-American companies in those terms. The texts themselves are culture-bound. Some attitudes described may indeed feel natural to Americans-- of course everyone wants to get ahead-- but there is no reason to assume that employees in all companies throughout the world have identical motivations. The value of these texts is more to encourage investigation than to provide a single model for analysis of corporate cultures.

For teachers preparing students to compete internationally are supposed to concentrate on culture. That is the message that has rung loudly throughout the years of this Eastern Michigan University conference. Each year, speakers from the corporate world have pleaded, "Teach your students about the culture." The problem, of course, is that American-born teachers of second languages may have a limited knowledge of the target culture themselves despite their efforts, and most teachers are completely ignorant of any corporate culture, American or foreign. Thus to identify a culture of business is to compound a difficulty: those of us who are non-native teachers of second languages must teach our students something of which we have little first-hand knowledge.

One may approach the problem in several ways, including drawing upon information available in print and on videotape

(for example the video series "Made in France," developed by Dr. Robert Crane and his associates in Lyon[3]) and interviewing people from the culture in question. Interviewing is not necessarily scientific, and in what I have heard, there are surely biases. (One person whom I interviewed, for example, knew that he would not be spending much more time in his job.) But the perceptions that these people have shared help direct attention to problematic areas: behavior in business meetings, the content in social exchanges, to name several.

A review of literature on the topic reveals general books with useful information: John Ardagh´s France in the 1980s: The Definitive Book[4] and Theodore Zeldin´s The French.[5] The one that sounds the most relevant, Doing Business Abroad, is entertaining, but so broad that it devotes only a page or so to any given country.[6]

If one does focus on a particular country, in this case, on France, certain somewhat academic themes begin to recur, concerns of interest for a commercial French course. They include:

1. Discussion of the role of the state in French business
2. Consideration of what a French analyst of companies expects to find when looking at a company, what the norm is.
3. Proposals for improving companies´ situations.

Available sources of information on these topics range from discussions of economic theory to case studies.[7] Of particular interest is a recent work, Paroles d´entreprises, in which the author, Henri Vacquin, lets readers hear the words of all those

involved with a company torn by a strike, from the most powerful to the lowliest.[8] Their comments are at once revealing and fascinating.

Topics such as those listed above receive attention in an ever-expanding body of literature on management and public policy. If the focus is narrowed, however, to questions of differences in kinds of interaction among people in companies, there is much less direct information available. With respect to the question of these less concrete differences, there appear to be two vastly different categories of response: one, that there really are no significant differences between people in French and American companies, and two, that there are.

Those who hold the first view maintain that "good" is international, that models which work are absolutely applicable across cultures, and that, furthermore, successful companies on both sides of the Atlantic, at least, share the same virtues. That was the view held by one of my interviewees. And Jacques Maisonrouge, recently retired top-level IBM executive, in his autobiography Manager international encourages a global view, stressing what can be accomplished by like-minded people from all over the world.[9] In fact, Maisonrouge includes extremely pertinent cross-cultural information in his work and freely characterizes "the French" and "the Americans." Yet his themes and indeed his career attest that differences need not be an obstacle.

The second category of response is that people in other

cultures do behave differently and that those differences are important, virtually unconscious, and unlikely to vanish rapidly. To paraphrase the title of a recent book by Michel Crozier, one does not change the world by decree.[10]

To give a precise example: in the literature cited above there is much discussion of information and how it should be handled in companies. In Search of Excellence is explicit on the subject: good American companies are those that encourage free and informal exchange of opinions among workers at all levels. "(Excellent companies) are obsessed about widely sharing information and preventing secrecy."[11] That book is translated into French[12] ; it is displayed in France with current best-sellers, and its tenets are echoed in books by French authors, like L'Entreprise du troisième type.[13]

And yet, the people whom I have interviewed are unanimous on this point: information is not handled the same way in French and American companies, despite apparent accord on the principle involved. The point should not be that one nationality group is right and the other is wrong. The point is to help our students become aware that their assumptions about practices relating to communication might not be shared in a non-American company.

The specifics: One person whom I interviewed said that the perception of information in the French company for which he worked is completely different from anything that he had known in the United States. (The speaker was that unusual American, the bilingual holder of an MBA.) His point: information belongs to

certain units on the French company's organizational chart. There is not only no interest in sharing that information; quite the contrary, it is kept "at home." One of his colleagues supported the contention: what you do with information that you get is sit on it, put it in your filing cabinet, keep it for your division of the company and try to be the first to do something good with it.

A comparable report comes from the head of one of France's most prosperous small companies, Giles Fuchs, the president of Nina Ricci, who has been gracious enough to talk with my colleague Susan Terrio from Elizabethtown College and me on several occasions. He explained that he would not encourage employees below a certain management level to express their opinions about projects for the future-- projected new directions for the company to take by introducing a new product, for example. The amount of information deemed appropriate for a person to have and use is clearly tied to the perception of structural relationships within the company. Monsieur Fuchs presented the stand as both reasonable and normal: the discussion that would result from such an overture on his part to those not normally party to such decision making would effectively stop the company short by taking precedence over people's real jobs while they articulated and argued their points of view.

Fuchs' statements make the link between information, decision-making, and hierarchy clear. The notions that cultural differences determine who may participate in planning is

discussed in some detail by William W. George, Vice-President of Honeywell, Inc., in an article which appeared in French in Harvard-L´Expansion, summer, 1983.[14] Contrasting the informal style of Silicon Valley companies with hierarchized decision-making typical in Europe, he writes: "(the President of CII-Honeywell Bull) must get not only the approval of the three principal stockholders of the company, but also that of a certain number of high-level government officials on the necessary support for financing the project... (The director of Yamatake-Honeywell in Japan) insists that each of his three principal directors show his support of a project by signing before the project is undertaken." With respect to discussion and decision-making, George points out the contrast between the informality of the American companies and the rigidity of Honeywell´s European and Japanese subsidiaries, but notes the consequence of the procedure in Japan is that development time for a project is 30% less than it is in America or Europe. Our value judgment that the Japanese procedure is overly bureaucratic, he suggests, must be kept in perspective.[15]

George also contrasts the expectations of Americans and Europeans with respect to the ability of their superiors to provide information, referring to a study done by André Laurent at the INSEAD of Fontainebleau: "Eighteen percent" --only 18%-- "of Americans questioned felt that a manager should be able to give precise answers to most of the questions that his subordinates could ask." This capability was judged important by

53% of the French managers interviewed and 78% of the Japanese.

George paints the sad portrait of the new French manager in an American company waiting to be asked those questions to which he wants to give precise replies (the questions are simply not forthcoming), and reminds us that management styles cannot simply be transplanted from one culture to another.[16]

These perceptions relating to information and decision-making do not surprise: those who have studied the French and France for a long time are not surprised to come across the presence of hierarchies. What is interesting, though, is the notion of establishing reference points of this sort with the eventual aim of putting together a guide that will be of use to people who want to deal, specifically, with France, and more specifically with the corporate culture of France. Gleanings of information could form the basis for a useful manual, and were there enough gleanings, the sense of fragmentation that exists when one comes across relevant insights would not be so frustrating as it is now. Such a manual, a text that to the best of my knowledge does not yet exist, could be most useful for students in the future. By collecting this sort of information and by focusing on the ways in which differences among companies reflect cultural diversity, we can help our students develop the understanding and sensitivity needed in an international environment.

FOOTNOTES

[1](Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1982).

[2](1982; New York: Warner Books, 1984).

[3]Information may be obtained by writing to Dr. Crane at the Groupe Ecole Supérieure de Commerce de Lyon, 23, avenue Guy de Collongue, B.P. 174, 69132 Ecully Cédex, France.

[4](New York: Penguin, 1982).

[5](1983; London: Fontana, 1984).

[6]Gavin Kennedy, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985).

[7]Works of interest include Jean Brilman, Modèles culturels et performances économiques: Les hommes, les entreprises, les Etats (Boulogne-Billancourt: Editions Hommes et Techniques, 1981); François Ewald, L´Etat Providence (Paris: Grasset, 1986); Jacques Lambert, Politiques globales de communication interne: Douze études de cas d´entreprises (Paris: Entreprise Moderne d´Edition, 1981); Daniel Mothé-Gautrat, Pour une nouvelle culture d´entreprise (Paris: Editions La Découverte, 1986).

[8](Paris: Seuil, 1986).

[9](Paris: Robert Laffont, 1985).

[10]On ne change pas la société par décret (Paris: Grasset, 1979).

[11]Peters and Waterman 251.

[12]Title of French translation: La Passion de l´Excellence (Paris: Interéditions, 1985).

[13]Georges Archier and Hervé Sérieyx, (Paris: Seuil, 1984).

[14]"Mañagement européen ou américain?" 70-75.

[15]George 71.

[16]George 71-2.

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